

Iraq LINK

Our troops have earned more time

By Brian Baird

Special to The Times

The invasion of Iraq may be one of the worst foreign-policy mistakes in the history of our nation. As tragic and costly as that mistake has been, a precipitous or premature withdrawal of our forces now has the potential to turn the initial errors into an even greater problem just as success looks possible.

As a Democrat who voted against the war from the outset and who has been frankly critical of the administration and the post-invasion strategy, I am convinced by the evidence that the situation has at long last begun to change substantially for the better. I believe Iraq could have a positive future. Our diplomatic and military leaders in Iraq, their current strategy, and most importantly, our troops and the Iraqi people themselves, deserve our continued support and more time to succeed.

I understand the desire of many of our citizens and my colleagues in Congress to bring the troops home as soon as possible. The costs have been horrific for our soldiers, their families, the Iraqi people and the economy. If we keep our troops on the ground we will lose more lives, continue to spend billions each week, and, given the history and complex interests of the region, there is no certainty that our efforts will succeed in the long run. We must be absolutely honest about these costs and risks and I am both profoundly saddened and angry that we are where we are.

Knowing all this, how can someone who opposed the war now call for continuing the new directions that have been taken in Iraq? The answer is that the people, strategies and facts on the ground have changed for the better and those changes justify changing our position on what should be done.

To understand the magnitude of the challenge and why it is taking time for things to improve, consider what happened as the result of the invasion and post-invasion decisions. Tens of thousands of Iraqi lives have been lost and hundreds of thousands have fled the country. We dismantled the civil government, police, armed forces and the nation's infrastructure. We closed critical industries and businesses, putting as many as a half

million people, including those who best knew how to run the infrastructure and factories, out of work and filled with resentment. We left arms caches unguarded and the borders open to infiltration. We allowed schools, hospitals and public buildings to be looted and created conditions that fanned sectarian conflicts.

It is just not realistic to expect Iraq or any other nation to be able to rebuild its government, infrastructure, security forces and economy in just four years. Despite the enormous challenges, the fact is, the situation on the ground in Iraq is improving in multiple and important ways.

Regardless of one's politics or position on the invasion, this must be recognized and welcomed as good news.

Our soldiers are reclaiming ground and capturing or killing high-priority targets on a daily basis. Sheiks and tribal groups are uniting to fight against the extremists and have virtually eliminated al-Qaida from certain areas. The Iraqi military and police are making progress in their training, taking more responsibility for bringing the fight to the insurgents and realizing important victories. Businesses and factories that were once closed are being reopened and people are working again. The infrastructure is gradually being repaired and markets are returning to life.

Without question, these gains are still precarious and there are very real and troubling problems with the current Iraqi political regime and parliament at the national level.

The Iraqis are addressing these problems along with our own State Department but these issues will not easily be resolved and could, if not solved, throw the success of the entire endeavor into jeopardy.

Those problems notwithstanding, to walk away now from the recent gains would be to lose all the progress that has been purchased at such a dear price in lives and dollars. As one soldier said to me, "We have lost so many good people and invested so much, It just doesn't make sense to quit now when we're finally making progress. I want to go home as much as anyone else, but I want this mission to succeed and I'm willing to do what it takes. I just want to know the people back home know we're making progress and support us."

From a strategic perspective, if we leave now, Iraq is likely to break into even worse sectarian conflict. The extremist regime in Iran will expand its influence in Iraq and elsewhere in the region. Terrorist organizations, the people who cut off the heads of civilians, stone women to death, and preach hatred and intolerance, will be emboldened

by our departure. In the ensuing chaos, the courageous Iraqi civilians, soldiers and political leaders who have counted on us will be left to the slaughter. No American who cares about human rights, security and our moral standing in the world can be comfortable letting these things happen.

Our citizens should know that this belief is shared by virtually every national leader in the Middle East. There is also near-unanimity among Iraq's neighbors and regional leaders that partition of Iraq is not an option.

"You may think you can walk away from Iraq," I was told by one leader. "We cannot. We live here and have to deal with the consequences of what your nation has done. So will you eventually, if the Iraq conflict spreads and extremists bring us down as well."

I do not know the details of what the September report will contain, but I trust and respect Gen. David Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker. I have seen firsthand the progress they have made, and I firmly believe we must give them the time and resources they need to succeed.

Though we would all wish this conflict would end tomorrow, it will not. We are going to have to begin to withdraw troops next spring because our equipment and our soldiers are wearing out. However, even with the progress that has been made of late, we will have a significant military and civilian role in Iraq and the region for some time to come. That is the price we must all pay for the decision to invade. We cannot shirk that responsibility.

Progress is being made and there is real reason for hope. It would be a tragic waste and lasting strategic blunder to let the hard-fought and important gains slip away, leaving chaos behind to haunt us and our allies for many years to come.

This appeared in the Seattle Times on August 24, 2007. To view the article, please [click here](#).

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Combating Contractor Fraud in Iraq

The war in Iraq is costing \$6 billion a month and hundreds of billions of dollars in total thus far. Congressman Baird has worked to ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent wisely in Iraq and are not subject to fraud by government contractors.

Congressman Baird has introduced the Stop Fraud in Iraq Act. Congressman Baird's legislation will update the False Claims Act, a law that allows whistleblowers to sue government contractors suspected of fraud. The False Claims Act has been used to bring dozens of charges against Iraq contractors suspected of fraud, including Halliburton's subsidiary, Kellogg Brown and Root. However, a loophole in the False Claims Act that allows the Administration to stall the process has prevented pending Iraq contractor fraud cases from moving forward. Congressman Baird's legislation will close this loophole and protect U.S. taxpayers by ensuring that contractors in Iraq suspected of defrauding the government are being held accountable.

Congressman Baird also led the effort in the House of Representatives to extend the term of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR). The SIGIR serves as a critical watchdog over the billions of U.S. dollars allocated for Iraq reconstruction programs.

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